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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effect of factors outside the instructor's control on student ratings of instruction. Seven special items along with the standard Student Ratings forms were administered to 28 classes in the Anthropology Department. Results indicated that the impact of outside factors, as perceived by students, was not correlated with global evaluative ratings. (Author/RC)

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The Effect of Factors Outside the Instructor's Control on Student Ratings of Instruction

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The purpose of this study was to assess the effect of factors outside the instructor's control on student ratings of his/her instruction. Seven special items along with the standard Student Ratings forms were administered to 28 classes in the Anthropology Department. Results indicated that the impact of outside factors, as perceived by students, was not correlated with global evaluative ratings.

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The Effect of Factors Outside the Instructor's Control on Student Ratings of Instruction

Gerald M. Gillmore and Richard W. Naccarato

INTRODUCTION

During Spring Quarter, 1974, the Department of Anthropology and the Educational Assessment Center teamed to do research on the effect of several variables on student ratings of instruction (Gillmore and Amoss, Note 1). Students in twenty-two classes responded to three special items along with the standard Student Ratings form. These special items and the response positions are found in Table 1.

Results of this study showed that classes with higher average rated attendance received significantly higher ratings on most of the standard evaluative student ratings items. The percentage of assignments completed was not significantly related to the evaluative items. Importantly, the third special item exhibited moderately high correlations. Gillmore and Amoss described this result as follows:

> The direction of the relationship is as expected. Students who view factors out of the instructor's control to have a positive effect, also rate the class more favorably. Students who are unfavorably impressed by factors outside of instructor's control tend to rate the class less favorably. Although the direction of the relationship is as expected, the magnitude is surprisingly high and potentially important. If there are factors which affect an instructor's rating which are out of his/her control, this is very important in assessing the meaning of student rating results. Furthermore, if, as these data suggest, the students can assess the impact of these factors, then it is fairly simple to adjust results appropriately (p. 2).

Gillmore and Amoss also pointed out an alternative explanation for the magnitude and direction of the correlations:

Table 1

The Three Special Items of Spring Quarter, 1974, Study

1. Percentage of class meetings of this course you attended during this quarter (to the nearest approximate percent)	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	50 or less
2. Percentage of assigned reading completed (to the nearest approximate percent)	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	50 or less
3. How have factors which are out of the instructor's control influenced your evaluation of this course (such as time class meets, class room location, class size, personal characteristics of the instructor, reason for taking this course, etc.)?	Strong Negative Influence	Weak Negative Influence	No Influence	Weak Positive Influence	Strong Positive Influence
	(Less Favorable)			(More Favorable)	

> Unfortunately, the wording of the item itself is rather long and perhaps not altogether lucid. A student who did not read the item carefully might have responded positively or negatively on the basis of his/her feeling about the course as a whole rather than on the basis of the uncontrollable factors. If this happened with moderate frequency, the results would be correlations of the magnitude and direction obtained (p. 2).

Given the potential importance of the finding described above, we designed a follow-up study to more clearly explicate the relationship of the ratings of factors outside the instructor's control with the ratings of evaluative items.

METHOD

The Instruments

Fall Quarter of 1974, all teaching faculty in the Department of Anthropology were asked to administer the Student Ratings Forms of the Instructional Assessment System (Gillmore, Note 2). The Instructional Assessment System provides five different forms for instructor use; however, all forms share four general, evaluative items. These four items and their response positions are found in Table 2.

In addition to the regular form, seven additional items, designed to clarify the puzzling relationship noted above, were administered to students. These items with their response positions are found in Table 3. Items 23 through 26 are specific demographic features of a course which are considered to be out of the instructor's control. Item 27 is simply a rewording of the third item of the previous study, but with the ambiguity removed by only asking if there was a tendency to rate the course lower because of circumstances beyond the instructor's control. The wording of item 28 represents an attempt to neutralize factors outside the instructor's control by asking students how they would expect to rate a different, equally qualified

Table 2

Global, Evaluative Items of the Instructional Assessment System

1. The course as a whole was:	E	VG	G	F	P	VP
2. The course content was:	E	VG	G	F	P	VP
3. The instructor's contribution to the course was:	E	VG	G	F	P	VP
4. The instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter was:	E	VG	G	F	P	VP

E = Excellent
VG = Very Good
G = Good
F = Fair
P = Poor
VP = Very Poor

Table 3

Additional Items, Fall Quarter 1974

23. The size of this class is: E VG G F P VP

24. The time of day at which the class meets is: E VG G F P VP

25. The location of the class is: E VG G F P VP

26. The physical qualities of the classroom are: E VG G F P VP

27. Do you feel that there were circumstances beyond the instructor's control, such as the four above, which caused you to evaluate this course less favorably than you might have otherwise?

0 = Definitely not
1 = Probably not
2 = Possibly
3 = Probably
4 = Definitely

28. If everything else about the course were the same, how would you expect to rate a different, equally-qualified instructor?

0 = Much more favorably than I rated the present instructor
1 = Somewhat higher
2 = Probably about the same
3 = Somewhat lower
4 = I would rate my present instructor higher

29. Do you think that this course is one which is fairly easy to teach?

0 = Yes
1 = About average
2 = No
3 = I really have no idea

E = Excellent
VG = Very Good
G = Good
F = Fair
P = Poor
VP = Very Poor

instructor teaching the same course. Finally, item 29 attempts a global assessment of factors outside the instructor's control by asking about how easy the course is to teach.

Also included in the analysis to be presented subsequently was an item found at the top of all student ratings forms: When enrolling, was this a course you wanted to take: Yes, Neutral, No. Class size, as indicated by the number of forms completed for a class, was also recorded for subsequent analysis.

Data Source

The instrument described above was administered in twenty-eight Anthropology classes. The smallest class size was three students, and the largest was 147, with a mean class size of 51 students and a median class size of 11.5.

RESULTS

All items from the standard Student Ratings forms were correlated with the seven additional items. The seven additional items were correlated among themselves. Also correlated with the above was the item "Was this a course you wanted to take?" and class size. It is important to note that these correlations were calculated across the 28 class means, not individual students. These correlations are presented in Table 4. Only correlations involving the four global items of the standard rating form are presented, since correlations involving the remaining items are completely consistent with these four and add little information.

Factors Outside the Instructor's Control

The four items tapping students' attitude toward specific demographic features of the classes correlated moderately among themselves (.29 to .58).

Table 4

Correlations among Student Ratings Items[a]

	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	Wanted to take class	Class size
1	06	24	09	17	-18	47*	21	14	-03
2	-09	05	-06	00	03	38*	24	15	-01
3	-02	11	-09	14	-03	55*	15	11	06
4	06	20	10	22	-20	50*	19	19	08
23		44*	58*	29	-65*	-15	-04	04	-63*
24			47*	48*	-51*	15	-16	04	-30
25				58*	-74*	17	26	34	-13
26					-34	29	-07	37	13
27						-19	-15	-11	28
28							41*	18	20
29								24	17

[a]Decimal points have been eliminated for ease of reading.

*$p < .05$

The rating of the favorableness of the class size correlated with actual class size (-.63), indicating that students tended to like smaller classes. The remaining correlations with class size were much smaller. Thus, within this sample of classes, the ratings of the four demographic features were related, however, this relationship cannot be attributed to the size of the class alone

All four of the demographic items correlated with the more global item 27, dealing with an overall assessment of the effect of factors outside the instructor's control (-.65, -.51, -.74, and -.34). This gives evidence that much of what influenced students in the rating of item 27 was captured in items 23, 24, and 25, and to a lesser extent 26. The highest correlation, curiously, was the location of the class.

Relation between Factors Outside the Instructor's Control and Overall Evaluation

None of the first five special items correlated significantly with the four global evaluational items. Furthermore, none correlated significantly with item 28, which was an explicit attempt to neutralize the effect of factors outside the instructor's control. Item 28 did, however, correlate with items one through four, which indicates it did serve to some extent as a general evaluative item.

Item 29 asked the student's perception of how easy the course was to teach. This item apparently failed as an indirect assessment of factors outside the instructor's control, since it failed to correlate significantly with any of the items dealing directly with these factors. Nor did this item correlate significantly with any of the four global evaluation items; thus, it did not seem to tap the student's overall evaluation of the

course. The only correlation of moderate size was with item 28 (.41), showing a tendency for a course rated as easier to teach to also be one in which another instructor would be rated higher as well.

Finally, the item "When enrolling, was this a course you wanted to take?" did not correlate significantly with any of the general evaluation items, or any of the factors outside the instructor's control. Thus, this sample gives no evidence that precourse attitudes, as measured by this item, are influential in postcourse ratings.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to gain a more accurate appraisal of the effect of factors outside the instructor's control on ratings by students of his/her instruction. The results of the study seem to strongly indicate that these factors do not have an influence. As direct evidence, items 23 through 27 did not correlate significantly with any of the global evaluative items. The lack of relationship between item 27 and the global evaluative items is especailly important, since it was a similar item which showed significant correlations in the previous study. It looks as though the correlations found in that study were caused by the particular item wording rather than by any actual relationship.

As further evidence, it is instructive to look closely at the results of item 28. In terms of assessing the influence of factors outside the instructor's control relative to the influence of his/her actual performance, there seems to be two distinct outcomes for this item. Insofar as factors outside the instructor's control have an influence, the rating of a different, equally-qualified instructor would not seem to change, since he/she

would be saddled with these same factors. Insofar as the instructor's performance is influential, the course would be rated as better taught by someone else in the case of a poor instructor, and more poorly taught by someone else in the case of a good instructor.

For the first possibility, item 28 would correlate with item 27, and not with items one through four (especially three and four which are global instructor items). For the second possibility, the opposite result is predictable. The data from this study come down in favor of the latter. The correlation between items 28 and 27 is low and non-significant (-.19). The correlations between item 28 and items 3 and 4 are much higher and significant (.55 and .50 respectively).

Although the data appear to give evidence that factors outside the instructor's control are not a significant determiner of global student ratings, some basic limitations in the method of the study should be mentioned. First, the study was done in only one academic department. Thus, these results cannot justifiably be generalized to all disciplines without replication in a more representative set of departments. On the other hand, there is no clear reason to expect Anthropology classes to differ in any important way from classes at least within other social science discipline areas.

Secondly, the number of classes represented in the study is relatively small (28) and many of these classes were quite small. A case can easily be made for replicating this study in a larger sample, as well as one more representative of the entire University.

Third, one should not lose sight of the fact that this study is based on the student's perception of the influence of factors outside the

instructor's control, not the actual factors themselves. The only variable in this study on actual, as opposed to rated, outside factors is class size, which did not correlate significantly with the evaluative items. Other factors might, however.

Finally, the basic design of this study was correlational, which makes cause and effect statements tenuous at best. Future studies could be designed which actually manipulate factors of interest, such as the classroom in which the classes are held.

Reference Notes

1. Gillmore, G. M., & Amoss, P. A preliminary report on the Anthropology Department student ratings survey (EAC Report 283). Seattle: University of Washington, Educational Assessment Center, 1974.

2. Gillmore, G. M. A brief description of the University of Washington Instructional Assessment System (EAC Report 276). Seattle: University of Washington, Educational Assessment Center, 1974.